

In O.C., water is the topic of conservation

Desperate officials say residents need to heed freeway signs and other warnings prompted by a weeklong filtration plant closure.

By JENNIFER DELSON
AND CHRISTOPHER GOFFARD
Times Staff Writers

Turning to freeway warning signs to get their message across, Orange County officials said Wednesday the area could face a water crisis if residents failed to step up their conservation practices.

For many, the first indication that anything was amiss were the Caltrans warnings — 35 of them — that materialized on the Santa Ana, Orange, San Diego, Riverside and Costa Mesa freeways.

"ORANGE COUNTY WATER EMERGENCY CONSERVE WATER," the signs read. The freeway message boards are usually reserved for child abductions and traffic snarls.

The water shortage stems from the week-long shutdown of a water treatment plant in Yorba Linda that supplies Orange County with half of its water and South County with 95%. Yet since the shutdown of the Robert B. Diemer plant for upgrades was planned for more than a year, how did it suddenly become an "emergency"?

Water officials insist they've done their best to gently urge conservation: issuing news releases, buying radio time, making automated calls to residents. But in this uncommonly dry season, people just aren't



DON BARTLETT/ Los Angeles Times

GETTING THE MESSAGE: After the Caltrans signs — such as this one on Interstate 5 in San Juan Capistrano — went up, residents started to get the idea.

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hearing — or just aren't heeding — pleas to delay watering their lawns or washing their cars until the plant reopens Sunday.

"We thought we were prepared," said Karl

Seckel, assistant general manager of the Municipal Water District of Orange County. "The last two years we did a similar shutdown. When we requested the conservation, it was there."

As ominous as the Caltrans signs seem, the likelihood that Orange County will be on the brink of running out of water is remote.

Firefighters and hospitals are not in danger. **[See Water, Page B8]**

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Plant closure is making O.C. water-tight

[Water, from Page B1]

ger, officials say, and vast backup supplies elsewhere in the county make it unlikely that kitchen spigots will run dry. Still, officials were troubled that water usage in some areas was 40% higher than expected Monday and Tuesday, and reservoirs in cities such as San Clemente and Yorba Linda were sinking rapidly.

But on Wednesday, the county was conserving again. The Caltrans signs seemed to be doing the trick. "We had used all the traditional means to ask residents to conserve, and usage was still up," said Kelly Hubbard, emergency services manager at the water district. "Considering that most people spend a lot of time driving on the freeways, we thought this was a good way to get the message" across.

Caltrans officials said this was the first time their freeway signs, which will continue to carry the water conservation pleas, were used for that purpose. They were unaware of any traffic problems or accidents caused by the new messages.

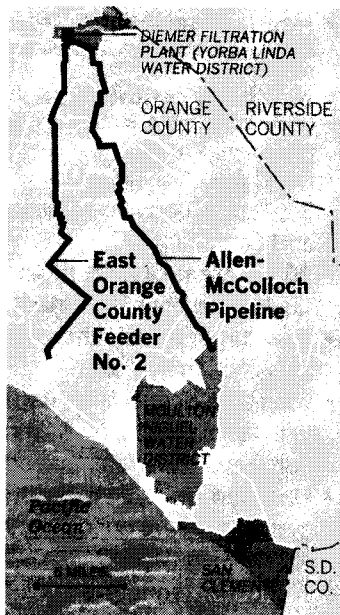
"We knew this wasn't just a promotional idea," said Yvonne Washington, a Caltrans spokeswoman. "When they call, it's really an emergency." She said the messages would continue until further notice.

In Yorba Linda, half of the 50-million-gallon water reserve was gone within two days of the shutdown, although a new pump in-

Water shortage

A filtration plant, and two pipelines that each carries 60 million gallons of water per day to southern Orange County, is shut down until Saturday night.

Areas of concern



Note: White lines indicate other water district boundaries

Source: Municipal Water District of O.C.

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stalled Tuesday will probably prevent residents from running out of water, Seckel said. In San Clemente, officials feared that

without conservation, the reservoir level would drop to 30%, about 10% less than what is minimally maintained, said San Clemente water conservation specialist Nathan Adams. "We were sucking that water out faster than we ever imagined," Adams said. "We don't want to shut water off in people's homes."

But George Scarborough, San Clemente's city manager, said he was troubled by the phrasing on the Caltrans signs.

"'Emergency' implies that we didn't know this was going to happen, or the residents didn't know. There was considerable notification," Scarborough said. In San Clemente, he said, "we're not in a crisis or emergency mode."

Orange County Fire Authority Capt. Steve Miller said fire authorities were carefully monitoring the situation.

"Of course we are concerned — if there is no water, we can't fight fires," he said, adding that if there were areas without water, water tenders, which are tank trucks, would be sent on calls.

During the plant's shutdown, the Irvine Ranch Water District, which serves Irvine and other parts of Orange County, has been sending 16 million gallons of water a day to help South County with its supply. When the Yorba Linda plant shut down in previous years, she said, calls for conservation resulted in 10% to 20% drops in water usage

countywide.

"This year, perhaps because of drier than normal temperatures, that hasn't happened," said spokesperson Marilyn Smith.

Orange County gets its water from natural underground reservoirs and by importing it. Gina DePinto, a spokeswoman for the Orange County Water District, which serves northern and central Orange County, said the district's groundwater basin remained full of water, which could be sent to the southern counties in an emergency. Still, she said, it was a good idea to conserve.

"We live in a desert," DePinto said. "People don't often think [about] that."

Larry Dees, director of operations of the Moulton Niguel water district, which serves several southern Orange County cities, said water use dropped Wednesday, perhaps as a result of the freeway signs. He said the district ran an advertisement in the Orange County Register, paid for a radio spot, distributed door hangers and made automated calls March 22 and again on Wednesday.

"We were disappointed," Dees said of the lack of initial response. "We're happy now because it does seem the message is sinking in."

jennifer.delson@latimes.com
christopher.goffard@la
times.com